

# *Mapping Local Perspectives in the Historical Archaeology of Vanuatu Mission Landscapes*



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## INTRODUCTION

MUCH OF THE WORK OF CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY could be said to fit broadly into the framework of constructing narratives about past places. The concept “place” has been important for understanding culture, notably in humanistic geography, from which the theoretical literature on place is largely derived (Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Cresswell 2004; Pred 1984, 1990; Seddon 1997; Tuan 1978). Work on this topic in anthropology and archaeology has also grown over the last two decades (Basso 1996; Bender 1993; Bender et al. 1997; Bowser 2004; Ingold 1993, 2000; Pauls 2006; Rodman 1992; Wheatley 2004). Theorists often contrast space, defined as an abstract, measured way of dividing up the world, with place, which is considered more immersive, experiential, and meaning-laden. However, the space/place divide is not a simple Cartesian dualism along the lines of mind/body or nature/culture. In fact, all of these are problematic, overlapping, connected categorical divisions (Whitridge 2004). In this way, space can be considered a part of place, representing those aspects of the places in which people live that can be experienced or measured in three dimensions (four, if one includes time). In other words, the act of measuring things spatially does not necessarily divorce them from their context, the reality in which they dwell, so long as the measured phenomena are meaningfully related back to this context.

Archaeological fieldwork, including mapping, is inherently embedded in places (Flexner 2009). Whether doing a phenomenological analysis of a landscape by thinking through our personal, humanistic experiences, or quantifying settlement patterns using high-precision surveying equipment, we do our work while living in the locations we are studying, often working closely with local people in the process. In fact, the act of measuring can add layers of meaning to understandings of place. This dynamic is explored below using recent archaeological fieldwork data from the islands of Erromango and Tanna in Vanuatu (Fig. 1). This article explores the relationships between archaeology, mapping, and oral traditions, and some of their theoretical implications, by examining surface survey data from mission sites and surrounding

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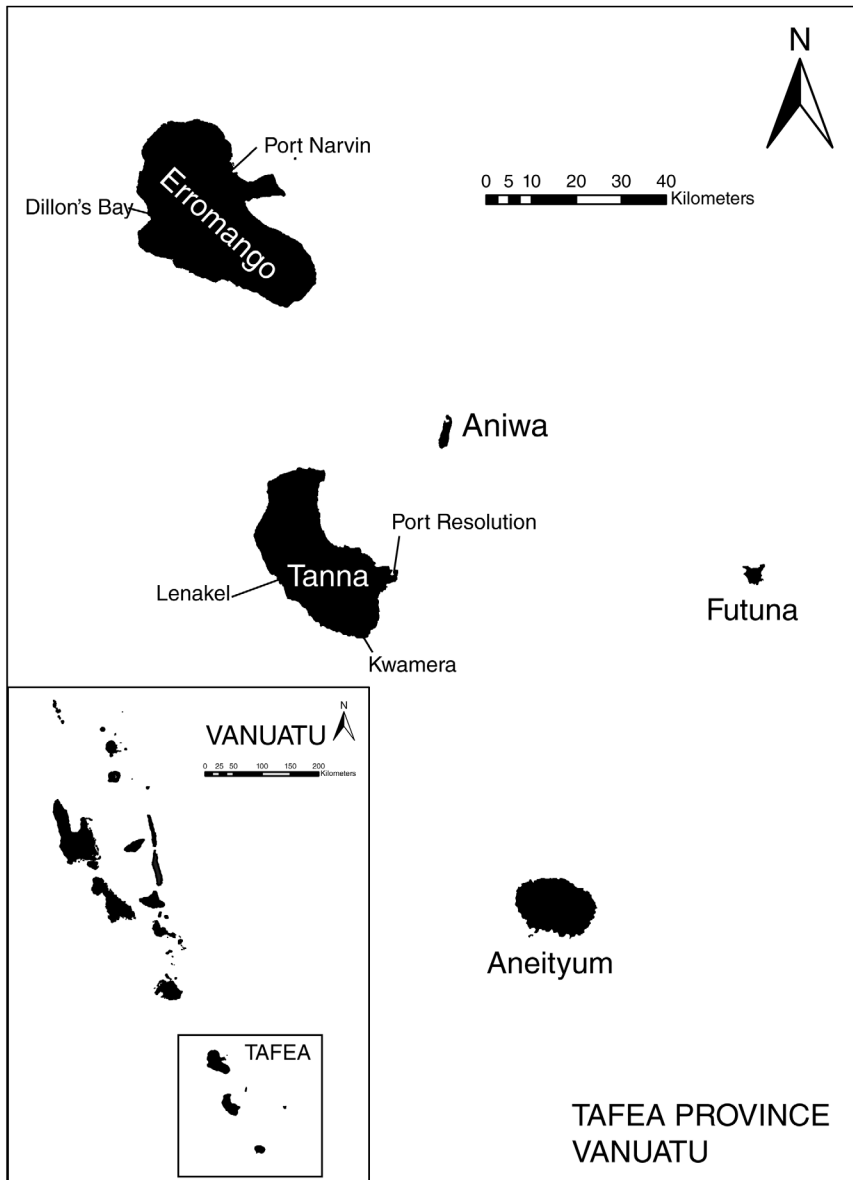


Fig. 1. Map of TAFEA Province, Vanuatu, showing the main settlements near mission-era landscapes (adapted from shapefiles courtesy of Vanuatu Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources).

indigenous landscapes on Erromango and Tanna. Four case studies provide the relevant data: a landscape recording of oral traditions as related to remembered locations (called an “event landscape”); a petroglyph field related to oral traditions and native biographical history; stone remains from a native village associated with oral traditions; and a digital elevation model of a monumental earthwork related to historical indigenous labor.

These fairly different kinds of evidence converge on three important points. First, the combination of archaeological surveying techniques, a close reading of the landscape in person, and local oral traditions always yields a richer understanding of the past than would be derived from using any one line of evidence exclusively. Perhaps this is not a surprising observation for many archaeologists, but it bears repeating. Many other disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, geography, history, and ecology, could benefit immensely from archaeological perspectives, but they generally do not include them. Second, these accounts of past places provide a valuable avenue for using the unique perspectives of archaeology to engage with local Melanesian communities in ways that address their research interests. Third, these mapping activities do not necessarily produce authoritative, static, or crystallized representations of the past. Rather, they provide a set of images that can be used as starting points for ongoing discussions and reinterpretations in a variety of overlapping local and academic settings. Produced through fieldwork and more distant spatial analysis, the maps also provide new information. Archaeologists interested in working closely with local communities in the places where we conduct fieldwork should recognize that our specialized skills can contribute something valuable to local discussions; at the same time, local knowledge is absolutely valuable to more global theoretical discussions in our discipline.

#### MAPPING, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND ORAL TRADITIONS

For archaeology, the key practice of measuring space can be described with the shorthand term “mapping.” Mapping can refer to any number of practices and techniques, but for the purposes intended here, encompasses any activity carried out to measure and project spatial relationships between archaeological phenomena, usually in a visual medium (Howard 2007; McCoy and Ladefoged 2009), though not necessarily exclusively (Cocroft and Wilson 2006). Archaeological mapping has been the subject of recent re-evaluations and critiques, notably focusing on: the gendering of mapping practices and the “male gaze” (Tomášková 2007; Wickstead 2009); the potential of place-based approaches to mapping (Flexner 2009); the relationship between environmental perception, space, and power as explored through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) (Kosiba and Baker 2013); and collaborative uses of GIS (Purser 2012). Mapping has become an important part of the discussion of meaningful collaboration with local communities, as attempts are made to shift cartographic techniques from tools of dominance and hegemony to methods for contesting dominant knowledge; bolstering indigenous claims to land, recognition, and resources; and documenting other phenomena relating to human rights (Allen et al. 2002:322–325; Chapin et al. 2005; Crosby 2002; Myers 2010). As an example, Tsing (2008:412–419) notes that tribal elders in southern Kalimantan, Indonesia have used hand-drawn maps as counterpoints against more “formal” looking maps created by government and NGOs in making claims about the nature of their territories. She refers to this process as “countermapping,” noting that these kinds of projects can move cartography from a colonial practice of dominance to one in which local communities can make authoritative (i.e., officially recognizable, even if locally contested) claims about their own knowledge.

Of course, the nature of cartographic knowledge remains debated both within and outside academic circles. The debate has been particularly vibrant in discussions of

GIS technologies, which have become an increasingly standard part of mapping practices. Many scholars question whether “participatory” mapping projects involving GIS truly engage local communities (Chapin et al. 2005:627–630). In archaeology more specifically, GIS has long been subject to critique as a medium for understanding the past (Hacıgüzeller 2012; Wickstead 2009). Some archaeologists have even implied that the technology should be abandoned altogether, while others appear to take the results of GIS work at face value as direct evidence of past realities. Hacıgüzeller (2012:255–257) suggests taking a “non-representationalist” perspective as a useful middle ground. From such a perspective, archaeologists can use cartographic technologies such as GIS to understand the past, while continuing to recognize that these images do not simply and unproblematically represent the past. Rather, GIS can provide a way of thinking through archaeological data that complements more phenomenological or hermeneutic approaches.

Various kinds of evidence and multiple techniques were used in mapping colonial Melanesian landscapes in Vanuatu for this study in an attempt to create a rich set of overlapping narratives about the past that take into account both local and academic perspectives. As described below, tape and compass maps, total station data, GPS, and GIS were integrated with oral traditions and other more experiential engagements with the landscape.

In the Pacific Islands, there is a strong tradition of settlement pattern archaeology that involves surveying and mapping all classes of archaeological features as well as environmental settings and resources across large portions of island landscapes.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here that many of the earliest archaeological surveys in this region employed local informants who were responsible for guiding archaeologists to significant sites. The oral traditions of Pacific Islanders have been alternately embraced and treated with skepticism by Pacific archaeologists (e.g., Dye 1989). In the twenty-first century, the pendulum appears to be swinging back toward the widespread use of native traditions in archaeology as part of an ongoing multivocal turn in the discipline (David et al. 2012), and because of the recognition that indigenous oral traditions and mythology provide valuable data that can be used alongside archaeological findings in order to understand the Pacific past (Carson and Athens 2007; Kirch 2010). In Vanuatu, some of the most significant pioneering fieldwork in archaeology stemmed from the archaeology of oral traditions, notably relating to the locally famous chief Roi Mata and the fifteenth-century eruption of Kuwae volcano in the central part of the archipelago (Garanger 1972, 1996). Given the colonial upheavals of the last 200 years or so in the archipelago, archaeologists working in Vanuatu acknowledge that ethnohistoric observations and oral traditions must be used carefully when examining the deeper past (Bedford and Spriggs 2008; Spriggs 2008).

Both historical and landscape archaeologists have for some time emphasized the utility of combining multiple lines of evidence to create richer, more nuanced understandings of the past. Oral traditions, ethnographic observations, archaeological remains, and written documents alongside ecological, geological, and climatological data all represent valid material for this pursuit; approaches that integrate many of these perspectives often provide the most insightful discoveries (e.g., Carson and Athens 2007; Hayden 2011; Lape 2002). Where archaeologists work as close collaborators and partners with local communities, and as control over the archaeological process is increasingly relinquished to those communities (Marshall 2002), there has been an effort to integrate documentary evidence, material remains, and oral

histories, as well as other types of data, without privileging one line of evidence over the others (Beck and Somerville 2005; David et al. 2012; McNiven and Russell 2005: 242–248; Stewart et al. 2004).

This approach was used in a recent survey of archaeological sites relating to the earliest Christian missions in the islands of Tanna and Erromango in Vanuatu. Local communities have largely defined the structure and priorities of archaeological survey in ways that challenge some orthodox ideas about what counts as archaeology. Relinquishing some control over what is mapped during survey while maintaining a high standard of mapping techniques has, however, arguably produced a more interesting set of maps in the end. The work done for this project combined traditional archaeological mapping practices with local oral traditions to bring about new understandings of past places that are relevant both for local engagement with history and the broader pursuit of knowledge about the past.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE NEW HEBRIDES MISSIONS ON TANNA AND ERROMANGO

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Anglophone Christian missionaries active in the South Pacific turned toward Island Melanesia, specifically the New Hebrides, which is what the island group constituting Vanuatu was called between its “discovery” by Captain Cook in 1774 and independence in 1980. Melanesia was seen as one of the last major frontiers of heathenism to be converted to Christianity. The push for mission work in the New Hebrides developed out of the murder and ritualized cannibalism of John Williams on Erromango Island in 1839. Williams was making a preliminary visit to gauge the viability of mission work in the region. This event had both local and global resonance and continues to shape local social memory through to the present.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the late 1840s, resident missionaries settled in the New Hebrides under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, initially and most successfully on Aneityum. After numerous failed attempts, notably on Tanna, and the martyrdom of additional missionaries on Erromango, the mission spread into the central islands of the New Hebrides by the 1900s. In addition to rich archival resources containing letters, diaries, photographs, and other personal materials, there is an ample published record of mission history including books written by missionaries and their allies that contain the official, heroic narrative of the Presbyterian Church in the New Hebrides (Gordon 1863; Gunn 1914; JPMF 1893–1966; Miller 1978, 1981, 1986; Paton 1903, 1907; Patterson 1886; Robertson 1902; Watt 1896).

Written documents do not tell the whole story of mission work in Island Melanesia. There is intense local interest in preserving both the physical locations related to mission heritage and local social memories about the mission period in Vanuatu. This is partly out of concern that, with the increased mobility of younger *ni-Vanuatu* (the term used for native Melanesian people from Vanuatu) who are drawn to employment opportunities in the capital city of Port Vila and abroad, some local knowledge is being lost to future generations. Concerns have emerged about the preservation of some colonial structures, especially mission churches. Because of these interests, archaeologists and Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS, Vanuatu’s national cultural center) established a partnership in 2011 to begin a survey of mission sites on Tanna and Erromango (Flexner 2012, 2013a, 2013b). With the exception of an earlier survey of the island of Aneityum (Spriggs 1985, 2007), this was the first major survey of mission-era

TABLE 1. TYPES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES RECORDED DURING SURVEY OF MISSION LANDSCAPES ON TANNA AND ERROMANGO.

	EAST ERROMANGO	SOUTH TANNA	SOUTHEAST TANNA	WEST ERROMANGO	WEST TANNA	GRAND TOTAL
Cave	2					2
Church	1	1	2	1	2	7
Hospital					5	5
House				1	1	2
Memorial	1	2	4	1	2	10
Memory place	6	3	2	7		18
Mission house	1	1	2	2	1	7
Mission infrastructure		1	3	4	2	10
Nakamal		1	1			2
Native village		2				2
Other					1	1
Petroglyph site	3					3
School					1	1
Tabu site	3	2				5
Grand total	17	13	14	16	15	75

sites in Vanuatu. In the first two field seasons of the project (in 2011 and 2012), a total of 75 archaeological features grouped into 20 “sites” relating to missions and their surrounding landscapes were documented in five different areas around Tanna and Erromango; these included features dating both before and after the mission period (Table 1).

The documented features range from more typical archaeological phenomena such as stone house foundations and petroglyph sites to features that should be considered more along the lines of intangible heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2011; UNESCO 2011). The latter places would not be immediately recognized as archaeological features, but they remain significant for local social memories and traditions. These include landscape features such as stones and trees that at first glance appear “natural,” but are imbued with local cultural and historical meanings. They should thus be included in the realm of archaeological features. I refer to landscape features that evoke powerful social memories for local people as “memory places.” Memory places are an integral part of areas where history is performed by local knowledge holders. As discussed below, I call these areas “event landscapes.”

In addition to surface survey, test excavations were carried out at several sites in the survey area. Analysis of the material culture is ongoing, along with research in archives and museum collections. While fieldwork is focused on sites associated with mission activities, the surrounding landscapes are also being explored in detail. Features were also recorded in places where other foreigners, such as sandalwood traders, had conducted activities, as well as sites of indigenous significance. It is important to note here that local people group indigenous sites and mission sites together as *kastom* (traditional) places. They appear to fit into the same category because of their association with ancestral figures among the earliest converts, some of whom have become local cultural heroes of a sort. This stems from the history of Christianity in Vanuatu, which I have elsewhere argued is at least as much about the indigenization of a foreign religion as it is about colonial conversion (Flexner 2013a; Flexner et al. in press). The

contemporary social environment is relevant to this dynamic since Christian religious affiliation is considered an integral part of native identity for many *ni-Vanuat*.<sup>3</sup>

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL MAPPING AND NATIVE CONVERSION: FOUR CASES

Much of the archaeological survey on Tanna and Erromango has been directed toward mapping recorded features. Because this is a collaborative project, a significant part of the mapping effort has involved creating maps that incorporate not only physical evidence, but also areas that are a part of local social memories and oral traditions. Archaeological skills facilitated the systematic recording of local landscapes, while local knowledge augmented and expanded what was included in the archaeological survey. A goal of this part of the project was not only to map the settlement space of colonial landscapes but also to use cartographic techniques to create a sense of place for mission sites and their surroundings. The maps are intended to reflect the relevant historical period (i.e., 1839–1917) and the meanings these places continue to hold for living Melanesians.

Four of the areas documented as part of this survey provide case studies that present the value of approaches to archaeological survey that combine rigorous mapping techniques, close collaboration with local communities, and the integration of oral traditions into archaeological research.

#### *An “Event Landscape” from Dillon’s Bay, Erromango*

The earliest phase of survey for this project involved walking through mission landscapes with various keepers of local social memories, including local chiefs, Presbyterian Church elders, and VKS fieldworkers. One thing that became apparent very quickly was the fact that local people considered an array of places to be relevant to archaeological survey that are not typically included among types of archaeological sites, such as culturally significant but otherwise unmodified or minimally modified trees and stones. These features played a significant role in local social memories about important historical events. Classified as “memory places,” these locations wound up being the largest single category of features documented during archaeological survey (N = 18 out of 75; see Table 1). Areas where clusters of related memory places are located together to record a particular historical episode are called “event landscapes” within the survey data for this project. Event landscapes are places where social memory is both constructed and performed as people follow in the footsteps of historical characters, spirits of the ancestors, or supernatural beings.

Several event landscapes have been recorded for this project, notably including four landscapes relating to the martyrdom of different missionaries on Erromango in the nineteenth century, one of which will be described here. Event landscapes were recorded with GPS and digital photography, as well as tape and compass where necessary. The most detailed event landscape mapped for this project relates to what is arguably the most dramatic event in New Hebrides mission history, the martyrdom of John Williams and James Harris at Dillon’s Bay, Erromango in 1839 (Fig. 2). As mentioned above, the death of these two was the catalyst for concerted efforts at mission work in the New Hebrides. Specifically, Williams, who was well known for his work with the London Missionary Society in Tahiti and the Cook Islands, was used as an exemplar of the pious missionary administering light to dark isles who was eventually

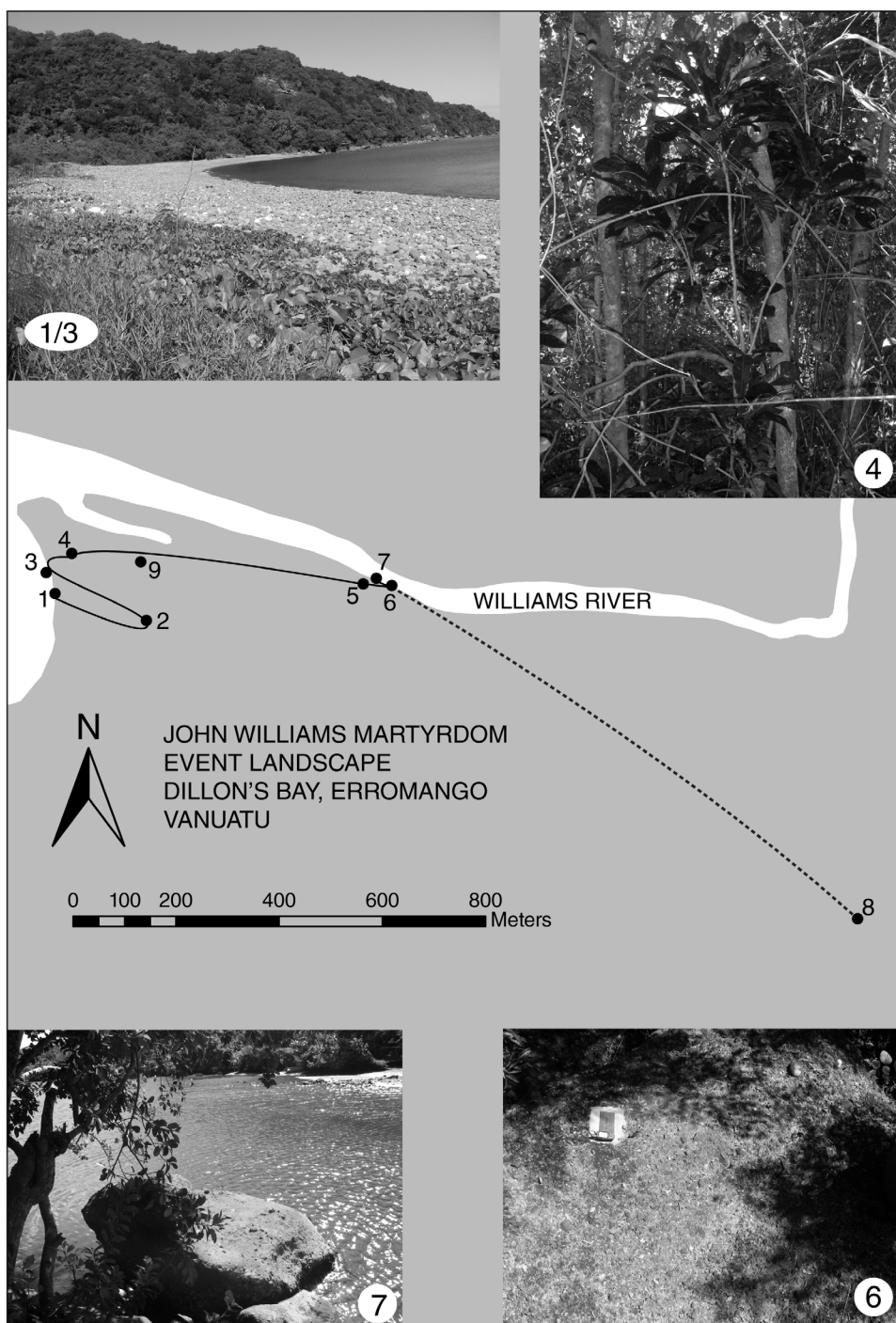


Fig. 2. The “event landscape” at Dillon’s Bay pertaining to the death of John Williams (see text for explanation of point numbers).



killed by ignorant savages for his faith (American Sunday School Union 1844). People on Erromango remember a different story, suggesting Williams' death was more a case of the wrong place at the wrong time, an unfortunately misguided revenge killing for a murder of two chief's sons committed by a sandalwood trader in the area a few months before Williams' fateful visit.

Regardless, Williams' death left an important imprint on social memory as it is written on the landscape around Dillon's Bay. Local informants remember this event in a series of places, beginning with the arrival of Williams and Harris on the boulder beach, where they attempted to arrange to visit a local chief (Fig. 2, Point 1). Ignoring the gesticulations of the local people who greeted them on the beach, Williams and Harris proceeded inland (Fig. 2, Point 2). After passing a symbolic point of no return, marked by a piece of bamboo, the two men were chased by local warriors, who killed the men with clubs, spears, and arrows on the beach as they tried to flee to their boat (Fig. 2, Point 3). These parts of the event are well recorded in missionary accounts (Gordon 1863; Robertson 1902), but for details of what happened next, we must rely on local oral traditions tied to places on the landscape. Interestingly, little is recorded in either oral or written history about the fate of Harris after his death, and no material remains indicate what might have ultimately happened to his body. There is, however, a detailed itinerary for Williams' body after his death.

From the beach, Williams' body was dragged inland. It is said that where his blood dripped on the ground, red-leafed *lompot* plants grow, marking the path (Fig. 2, Point 4). The body was taken past a lime mortar staircase that had been built by the sandalwood traders (Fig. 2, Point 5), to a large, flat boulder of the local limestone conglomerate (Fig. 2, Point 6). Here, Williams' body was stretched out, and local people pecked small cupules to mark his height and the span of his arms, as the man was unusually tall and long-armed by Erromangan standards. Finally, the body was taken to another boulder closer to the river that now bears Williams' name (Fig. 2, Point 7) to be divided among local chiefs to be ritually cannibalized. Some time after, Williams' skull was buried inland in a garden plot under a coconut palm (Fig. 2, Point 8). Much later, the death of Williams and the other martyrs of Erromango were memorialized in a stone enclosure at a place called Nokiyangouwi, which had originally been the location of an Erromangan *nevsem*, a traditional structure related to chiefly rituals (Fig. 2, Point 9).

Mapping event landscapes such as the one recording John Williams' martyrdom and other memory places around Erromango and Tanna has added layers of meaning to the stories that people remember about early mission encounters on these islands. While local people remember the places in which these events occur, it was only during archaeological survey that they systematically put the events in order, much as a forensic analyst might reconstruct the details of a crime scene from fragmentary pieces of evidence. Using GPS and digital photography, we were able to record this landscape to relate places along the beach, the river, and further inland into a coherent whole. Further, the survey of this landscape revealed several unexpected features, including a probable stone-lined grave with a marker made out of scrap iron, possibly salvaged from a passing ship or some piece of sandalwood-processing apparatus. Future excavation work on this feature might shed light on the details about this probable burial, though recovery of human remains is not a priority for this project. Surprises like this show that archaeological surveying is more than simply a handmaiden to oral

history. Survey findings not only add layers of meaning, but also previously unknown elements to past landscapes.

In relation to the discussion above, this approach used both the “embodied” perspective of full immersion in a landscape populated by places that could be used to summon historical figures in local memory, and the use of GPS and GIS to systematize that knowledge. The goal is to preserve what is known while also allowing for reinterpretation among the local community, rather than creating an authoritative version of history. With this in mind, these maps will be made available for local people with my interpretations, but also as blanks upon which people will be free to tell their own version of this story, and others, as this was one of several event landscapes recorded for the project.

### *Rock Art Near Port Narvin, Erromango*

On the other side of Erromango, local people in the past documented their own history using rock art in an innovative way that may have combined traditional motifs with novel storytelling techniques. Rock art around Erromango has been shown to relate closely to oral traditions, especially in the interpretation of different stylistic elements (Wilson 1999). A field of petroglyphs on a massive volcanic boulder on the coast at Bomtal, just north of Port Narvin, consists of pecked cupules, ellipses, and a possible sailboat (Fig. 3). This petroglyph field is said to record the story of Sou Sou, a native convert who appointed himself as the “defender of the faith” for eastern Erromango according to local reckoning, appearing as “the warm friend of the Mission” in the published accounts (Robertson 1902:187–188, 205–206). Local informants claim that the cupules pecked into the rock at Bomtal represent a counting device that indicates the number of battles that Sou Sou fought against those he perceived as enemies of the church, and, perhaps a bit ironically, the number of women he courted (this aspect of Sou Sou’s life history may not have been so desirable from the missionary’s perspective). Certain elements are a bit more difficult to interpret, but it is possible that the sailboat in the northwestern part of the petroglyph field is symbolic of connection to the outside world, specifically that of the outside world of the missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

This site highlights the fact that social memory is not simply a phenomenon of the present. Rather, people in the past actively manipulated and constructed social memory in material media, including architecture (Van Dyke 2009) and in this case, rock art. An interesting question raised by this particular site is the extent to which Sou Sou was positioning himself as an important historical character through this petroglyph site, much as the missionaries positioned themselves through the books they wrote or had written about them. Archaeology by itself can’t directly answer this question in one way or another. There are other rock art sites and memory places around Erromango and Tanna associated with particular ancestral beings, so it is possible that Sou Sou was intentionally crafting a historical record for himself.

The cupule arrangement at Bomtal is one of several rock art sites along the east coast of Erromango. Sou Sou’s site is interpreted as recent and relating to a specific character from local history both because of oral traditions and the single layer of cupules on the site. Elsewhere, as with the petroglyph field at Malap, slightly to the south (Flexner 2013a:21), cupule alignments overlie traditional motifs such as

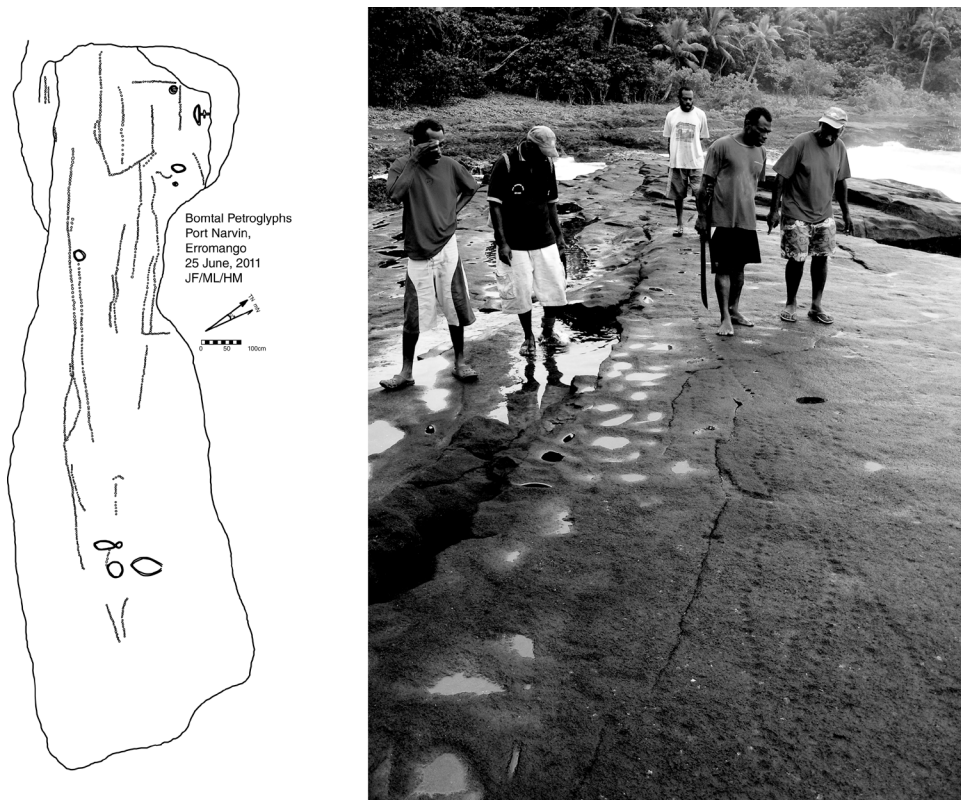


Fig. 3. Map of the petroglyph field at Bomtal (left); local Erromangan men discussing Sou Sou's story at the site (right).

anthropomorphs and concentric circles, and there are more modern elements such as ships and bottles, suggesting that this site accumulated through a longer time period. There are also older traditions of pecked as well as painted rock art on Erromango (Wilson 2002). In a way, the petroglyph field at Bomtal builds on these traditions while possibly incorporating new elements as related through oral traditions. Archaeological survey places the site within a broader context, located south of the local mission station at Potnuma, but north of the main village at Port Narvin. The location of this site is symbolic of the position of indigenous converts like Sou Sou as middlemen in the process of mission endeavors, working between the missionaries and local communities. Again, this may reflect an intentional decision by Sou Sou, positioning himself to play a certain role in local history. Using archaeological methods for recording rock art helps to solidify Sou Sou's story in place, both as it was recorded in the past and as it is remembered in the present, through the persistent medium of pecked cupules still present in the landscape.

#### *The Native Village at Kwaraka, Tanna*

While local people often remember the locations of historical villages, *nakamal* (the Bislama, Vanuatu pidgin, name for kava drinking and dancing grounds), and other

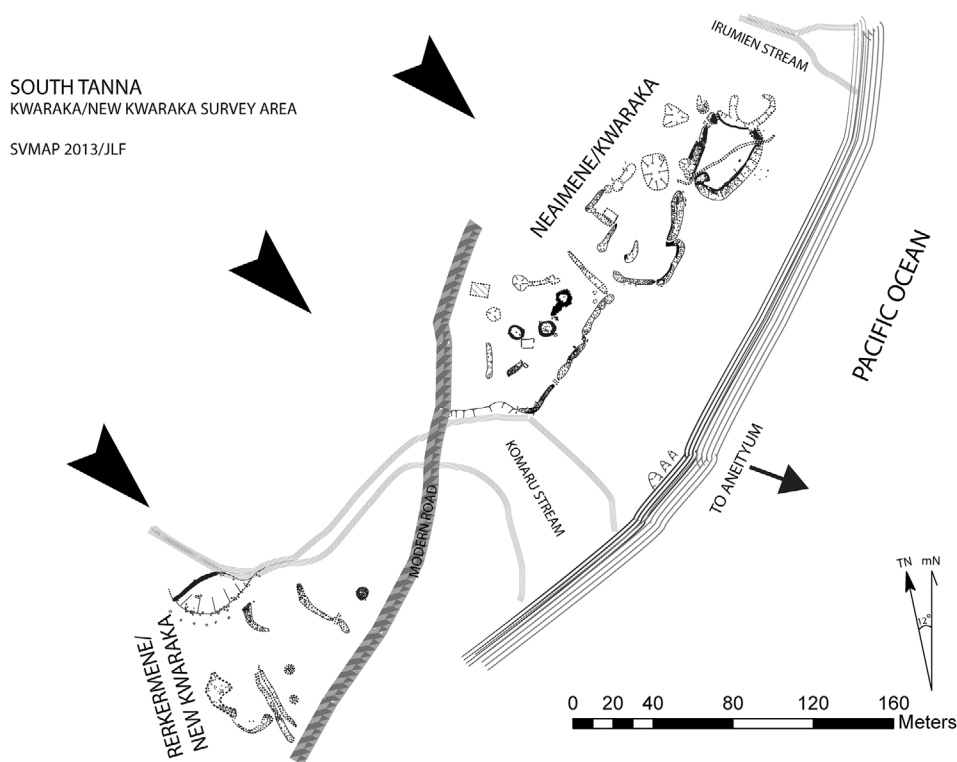


Fig. 4. Map of the major surface features of the native village at Kwaraka/New Kwaraka.

*kastom* sites, there is often little or no archaeological evidence on the surface in these. This makes sense in areas where people did not usually construct stone structures, and where the humid tropical environment results in rapid deterioration of organic materials and regrowth of dense vegetation cover.<sup>5</sup> The major exception documented in archaeological survey thus far is a native village with stone structures at Kwaraka on the south coast of Tanna, facing Aneityum (Fig. 4). Notably, this landscape consists of two clusters of features, and this clustering relates to a shift in settlement patterns having to do with the conversion process.

The landscape at Kwaraka is remarkable not only for its stone architecture, which is unusual for Tanna, but also for the oral history with which it is associated. Local informants remember Kwaraka as the home settlement of Yeni Iarisi, an important chief in this village around the time that the first Presbyterian missionaries arrived in the New Hebrides (Fig. 5). Iarisi made regular voyages on a canoe called Paru on the *kastom* “road” (sea route) to Aneityum to trade yams and grass skirts from Tanna for mats, minerals used for pigment, crabs, and water taro from Aneityum. The stone mound where Paru was kept when not on a voyage still remains toward the center of the Kwaraka cluster of features (Fig. 6). On one of these trips, Iarisi met John Geddie, the Presbyterian missionary on Aneityum, and after discussing the Gospels, Iarisi decided to bring the Good News back to the people in his village. The presence of these new religious beliefs was apparently (and understandably) somewhat threatening to



Fig. 5. Map of stone architecture at Kwaraka.

the existing order, resulting in tension between new converts and those who continued worship of the local yam god, Nokwenuk.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Iarisi moved across the river to the northwest and slightly inland to a settlement where worship could continue undisturbed, if somewhat in secret, now called “New Kwaraka” (Fig. 7). This place name is probably recorded in missionary accounts as Anui-karaka, which was the first place where Samoan teachers were settled on south Tanna (Miller 1978:37), though we have yet to find direct evidence of Samoan presence at this site.

Archaeologically, the stone structures at Kwaraka and New Kwaraka remain somewhat anomalous compared with other landscapes documented on Tanna and Erromango, and as mentioned above, may represent the area’s close connection to Aneityum, which is well known for its stone construction (e.g., Spriggs 1981, 1986, 1997:182–183). According to local informants, the stone mounds and walls were used to divert floodwater and to raise living spaces above the muddy soil during the wet season. Notably, the area of archaeological features in Kwaraka was continuously

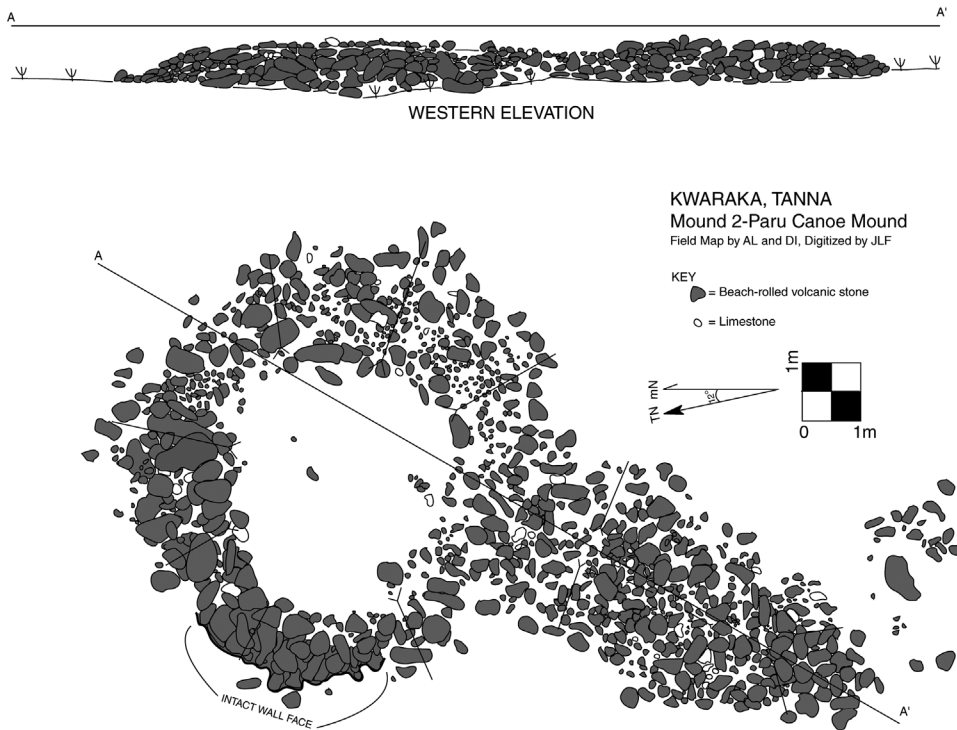


Fig. 6. Plan and elevation of the canoe mound belonging to Paru, the canoe Yeni Iarisi used to travel to and from Aneityum.

inhabited until quite recently, as some older local informants remember living as children in at least one of the surface alignments marking stone house foundations (structure H1 in Fig. 5). A 1 m × 1 m test excavation of the structure yielded a number of contemporary materials in the upper stratigraphic deposits, including plastic pen caps and the torso of a plastic figurine, probably a toy soldier. What is important to note here is the continuity of settlement patterns and vernacular architecture that parallels significant changes in religious belief from the middle of the nineteenth century through the present (Flexner 2013a).

Both Kwaraka and New Kwaraka, which are arguably two clusters within the same settlement, consist of a series of stone walls and mounds, which would have been punctuated by large *nakamal*. Unfortunately, only one of these *nakamal* is preserved, the others having been recently bulldozed during construction activities. But, the lone remaining *nakamal* at Irumien does provide a fascinating hint at the divergent form of this kind of space on south Tanna when compared with the rest of the island (Fig. 8). While *nakamal* are an important part of settlement patterns on Tanna in general (Bonnemaison 1994:106–108), they are usually large, cathedral-like spaces formed from open clearings framed by large banyan trees. At Irumien, in contrast, the *nakamal* is a sunken stone enclosure surrounded by large stone walls. Here as elsewhere, oral traditions augmented the story of the site, as local informants indicated that the place could be used for defense during times of warfare in addition to kava

## NEW KWARAKA, TANNA

JLF/CS/DI/DN

0 5 10m

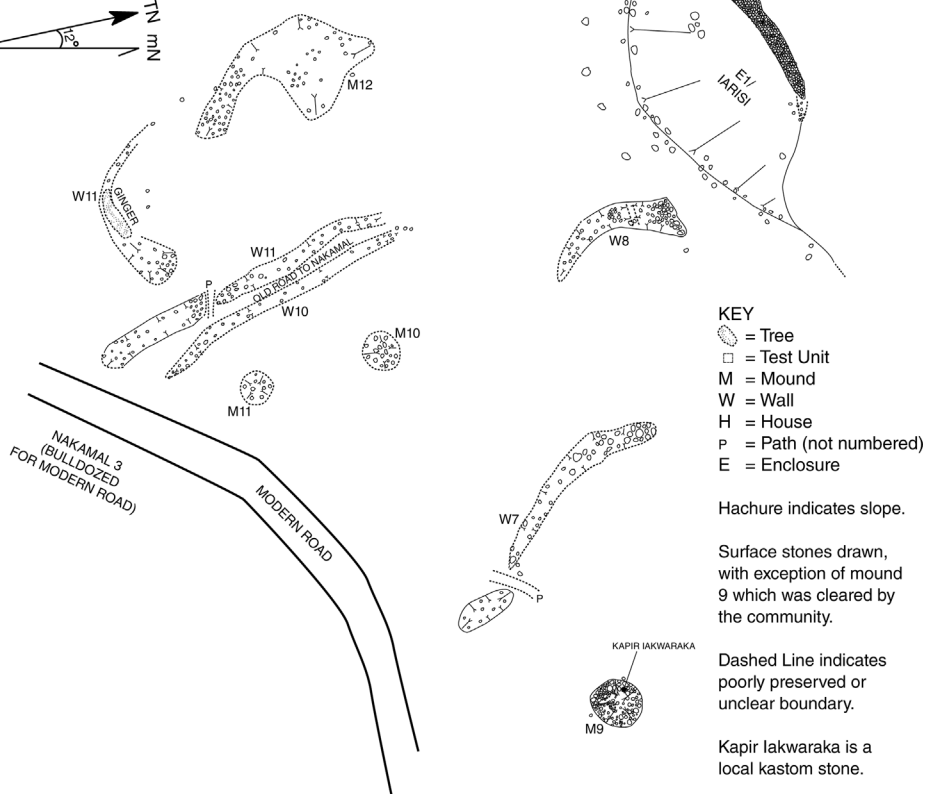
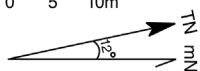


Fig. 7. Map of surface features at New Kwaraka. The enclosure where early converts apparently hid their worship is labeled “E1/IARISI.”

drinking and dancing. Further, there was a flat stone near the southern entrance to the site that was said to be a refuge stone for people hoping to escape death during times of warfare. Archaeology augmented what is known about this *nakamal*, revealing a grinding stone in another area of the site, probably used for processing nuts and other tree crops, as well as a row of embedded stones of unclear function along the most intact section of stone wall.<sup>7</sup>

The stone features that comprise the area of indigenous settlement in Kwaraka and New Kwaraka provide a valuable counterpoint to the mission remains recorded elsewhere in survey work on Tanna and Erromango. The traditions associated with Yeni Iarisi, which can be correlated with the physical presence of stone features along the coastal strip of the village, provide one of the clearest cases for the indigenization of Christianity by Melanesians. Yet these remains at the same time provide some of the clearest evidence for indigenous southern Tannese settlement patterns, which can be elusive to find archaeologically. During survey work in 2013, local fieldworkers also

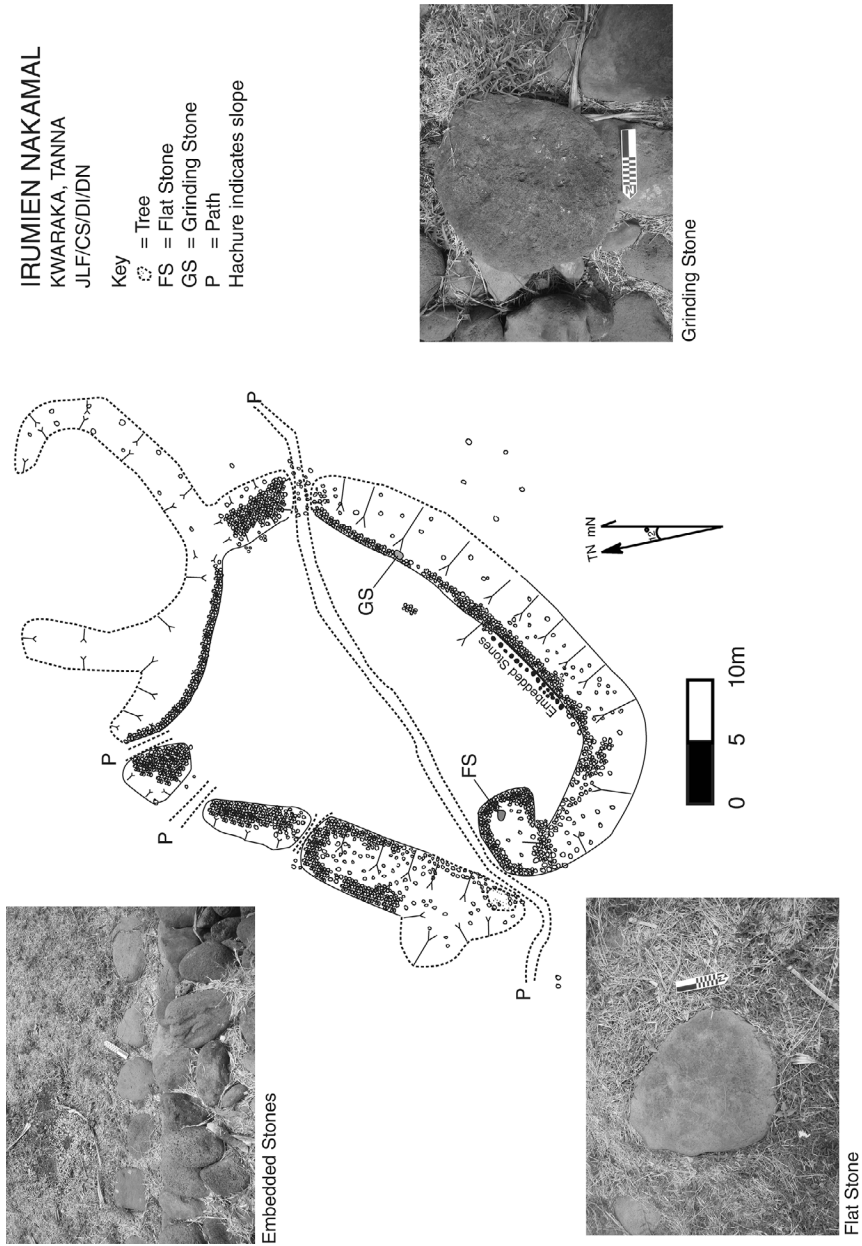


Fig. 8. Plan map of Irumien Nakamal, with photographs of some of the relevant details of the stone architecture.



pointed to what appear to be a series of large agricultural terraces just inland of this settlement, again probably signaling the close connections between south Tanna and Aneityum, though these have yet to be recorded in detail. Further, the archaeological evidence for traditional-style architectural forms being inhabited well into the second half of the twentieth century indicates the continuity of Melanesian lifeways long after widespread conversion to Christianity on south Tanna. These lines of evidence combine to enrich the stories that can be told about the places in this area in ways that couldn't be matched by relying on one kind of evidence (archaeological, oral-historical) to the exclusion of others.

*Mapping Indigenous Labor in the Lenakel Church*

Now we are preparing the site. To do this hundreds of tons of earth have to be removed, as we are going to put the church at the head of the street on the breast of the hill. I preferred this site, but did not press for it, as the work to prepare it would be very great, but the people would have no other, saying "Never mind the work, show us where to begin." After making the necessary measurements and taking the levels, my heart failed me and I said we had better look for another site, but they would not have it, urging "Leave it to us, we will soon shift it." After a service on the ground, they set to work like ants, men with pickaxes and shovels, women and children carrying off the earth on stretchers made with sacks and pieces of wood.

—JPMF 1905:9

The church at Lenakel, west Tanna is built on foundations resting on a monumental terrace cut into a hillside overlooking the harbor and the Pacific Ocean beyond. As the quote above describes, in July 1904 native laborers went about shifting "hundreds of tons" of earth with nothing but hand tools and "stretchers." West Tanna was one of the hard-fought mission fields of the late nineteenth century, and the Presbyterian Church sought to make a statement about the permanence and prestige of the mission by building an appropriately massive church in the area. The current church on this hillside in Lenakel is actually the third one on the site, though it incorporates the footings of the 1904 church for which the original terrace was constructed.

Archaeological fieldwork on the Tanna church has sought to fill in significant details about site history, as well as the construction, modification, and use of the current church, which was built in 1912 (Flexner et al. 2012; Flexner et al. 2015). Part of the documentation of the site includes a detailed topographic survey using a total station for the purpose of mapping the setting in which the church was constructed. To get a sense of the amount of labor that went into creating the terrace for the Tanna church two digital elevation models were constructed (Fig. 9). One is based on the surface created from all of the topographic points measured around the contemporary Tanna church. In other words, this model visualizes the terrace as it is today. The other is based on a surface that excludes points on the terrace, as an attempt to interpolate the hill surface as it would have appeared before the cutting of the terrace. The differences between the two models are striking, especially combined with graphs of the slope profile before and after the creation of the terrace.

Quantification of the obvious differences between the two surfaces must be done cautiously, as the precision of the surface on which the "before" model is based uses

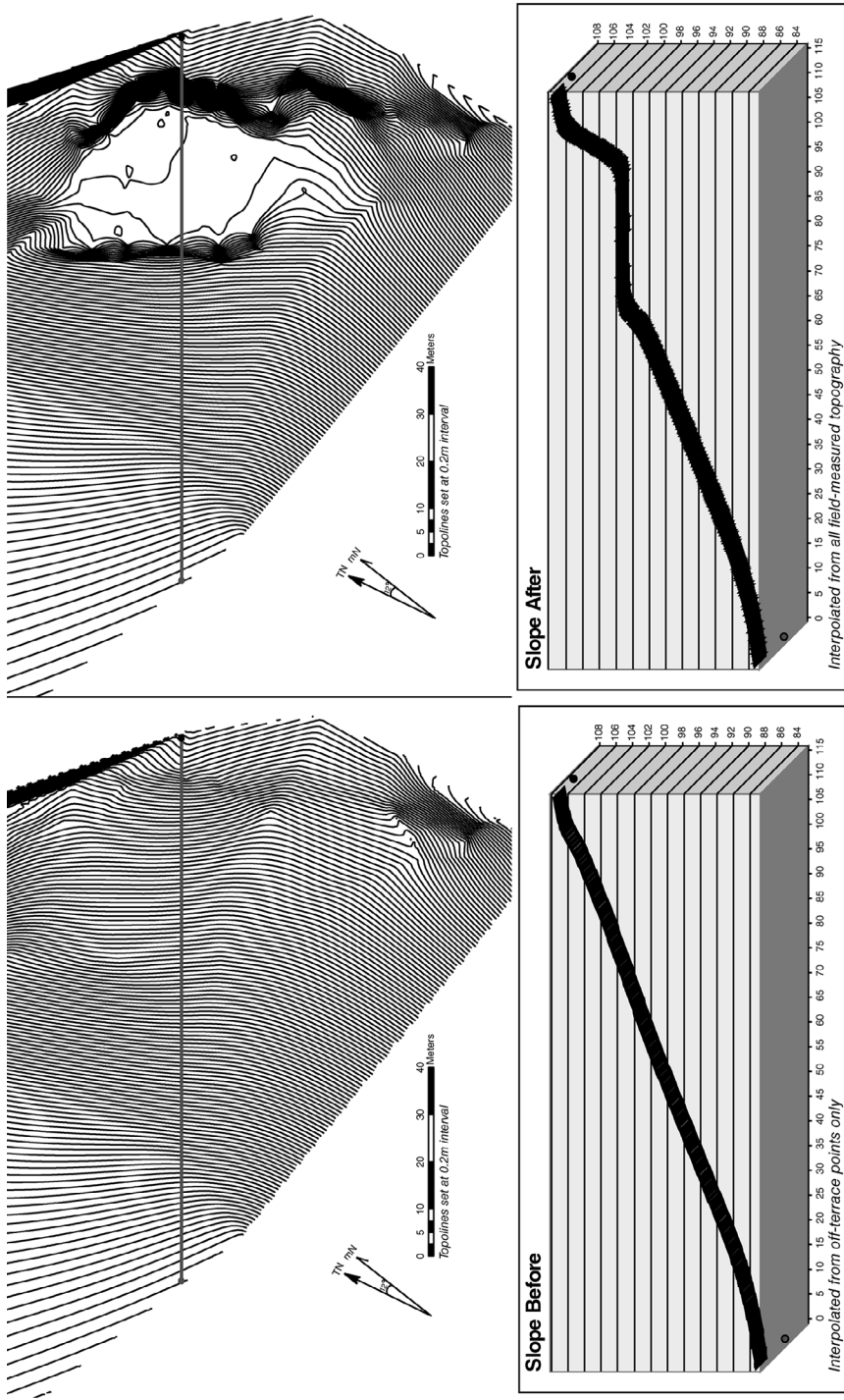


Fig. 9. Topographic map based on digital elevation models of the hillside at Lenakel before (upper left) and after (upper right) the large terrace was cut, along with slope profiles from before (lower left) and after (lower right).

fewer points, and thus must be used with less confidence. So while the differences between the models can be used to estimate the volume of earth moved, this estimate is probably subject to a fairly large error range. Using the “Cut Fill” tool in ArcGIS, calculations indicate that the main area where sediment was removed comprised slightly over 3700 cubic meters. Again, this is not by any means a precise figure, but roughly speaking, somewhere between 3500 and 4000 cubic meters is probably a reasonable estimate for the amount of earth removed by hand in constructing the terrace for the Tanna church. Considering that the missionary accounts estimated a week to cut this terrace, and hint that this estimate was correct (JPMF 1905:9, 12), this means teams of local workers would have shifted between 500 and 600 cubic meters of earth per day. In this case, the use of survey tools and GIS techniques provides information that would simply not be possible to produce from a purely experiential perspective. While one can get a sense for the size of the terrace cut into the hillside while walking around the current church in Lenakel, adding some quantitative data, keeping in mind the caveats above, helps to provide a sense of just how much work went into the creation of this landscape. It gives us cause to think about the sweat and sore muscles of the laborers who moved that much earth by hand in building a space for their church. In other words, the quantitative data actually adds to our humanistic understanding of the site’s construction, despite a commonly unstated assumption that numbers, especially when derived from GIS models, somehow diminish a “deeper” understanding of place.

Beyond these data, any further numerical estimates, such as the size of labor parties, are basically speculative in nature. What is known from both documentary sources and the local oral traditions is that this labor was organized and coordinated by the local chiefs, among them some of the key figures in west Tanna church history: Lomai, Titonga, and Iavis (Paton 1903; JPMF 1905:9). According to oral traditions, warfare remained a major part of life on Tanna well into the twentieth century, and on west Tanna this was often associated with fights for chiefly titles. For the Hawaiian Islands, Sahlins (1992:65, 91) suggests that during the first half of the nineteenth century, warfare was replaced by other chiefly activities, including commercial endeavors, but also church building and other mission work. Arguably a similar thing can be seen in the kinds of communal labor activities organized by Lomai, Iavis, and others, where a kind of spiritual competition, materialized in the construction of monumental landscapes for the growing church on Tanna, fulfilled a similar kind of impulse to the one that drove warfare.

Bolstering this interpretation, Bonnemaïson (1994:198–201) suggests that in the early twentieth century, Tanna’s population clustered around the two Christian “centers” of Lenakel on the west coast and Waisisi on the east coast, and that alignment with the church allowed for certain novel opportunities for ambitious Tannese chiefs living among a population fatigued by conflict. Ironically, however, the apparent unity created by the presence of the church was to be short-lived, as the increasingly repressive policies of the missionaries, and the powers of “Christian” chiefs chafed against more egalitarian traditional politics. This led to resistance, especially during the period of “Tanna Law” when *kastom* practices such as polygamy and kava drinking were explicitly outlawed. Arguably the rise of a solidified *kastom* movement that was as much political as religious in nature, and eventually the emergence of the John Frum “cargo cult” (Lindstrom 1993) could be tied to the misuse of church power early in the twentieth century (Bonnemaïson 1994:201–219).

### “PLACING” LOCALS IN COLONIAL LANDSCAPES

The geographic information systems and digitized vector maps created by archaeologists are composed of digital layers that stratify different types of information to visualize important phenomena from the past (McCoy and Ladefoged 2009). Using the framework outlined above, archaeological maps can also be considered as adding metaphorical layers to the past places with which we concern ourselves, partly because of the sense of place that emerges from the process of mapmaking (Bender et al. 1997; Flexner 2009). In the case studies outlined above, archaeological and topographic data are combined with social memory as recorded in written documents and oral traditions to add to knowledge about the New Hebrides missions in collaboration with local communities and aligning with their research interests. This is a central observation of this project: In working with local people, archaeologists can use their particular skills as mapmakers, excavators, analysts of material culture, animal bones, pollen, soils, and sediments to answer questions of relevance to local communities while remaining open to alternative interpretations of the results of our work (David et al. 2012).

Openness to multivocal interpretations of the past and close collaboration with local communities is absolutely crucial to the archaeology of oral tradition (McNiven and Russell 2005:234–248). Within this kind of approach, though, archaeological evidence should not be seen as a kind of handmaiden to oral history, what Deetz calls “an expensive way of finding out what we already know” (1996:32). In other words, this kind of archaeology requires a balancing act, one in which the “dominant” gaze of the archaeologist does not inhibit the possibility of alternative interpretations, while the archaeology itself is not subsumed under a monolithic “oral tradition” that does not exist anyway, given the complexity with which communities interpret their own history.<sup>8</sup> Archaeologists must be careful that their claims to authoritative knowledge could be used to silence the very kind of multivocality that we are hoping to encourage. With this in mind, we need to recognize that our interpretations are just one voice among many. While we do have specialist knowledge relating to our methods and materials, local people have specialist knowledge about their places.

Thus oral history and archaeology, along with the documentary record, must exist in conversation with one another (Beck and Somerville 2005; Kristensen and Davis 2013). This conversation is best carried out where local people and archaeologists work in partnership with each other. As shown above, archaeology and oral traditions often complemented each other in the study of mission landscapes on Erromango and Tanna. The research results when using both kinds of evidence were much more enlightening than using either kind of source exclusively. This observation can be equally true for studies of the deeper past, as oral traditions can yield surprising insights stretching back over centuries or even millennia (Carson and Athens 2007; Collerson and Weisler 2007; Echo-Hawk 2000; Whitridge 2004).

For this study, oral traditions contain specific details about the individuals who inhabited archaeological sites, and the events that transpired within them. Archaeological research not only adds complexity and nuance to what was known about the past from other sources, it can usually be counted on to reveal things about the past that are not and perhaps cannot be known from oral traditions, written documents, maps, or photographs. This stems both from the details that archaeologists are trained to notice and record and the nature of archaeological fieldwork, which involves

looking not only in the places where you are fairly certain you will find something (though you never know what that “something” will be), but also in those places where no one has looked before. An unknown grave found while cutting a path, anomalous stones noted while mapping a structure, even a model for the modified slope of a hill add layers of meaning to historical landscapes. In each case, the mapping process both systematically documented local knowledge and augmented what was thought to be known about the past through unexpected findings.

For archaeologies of the recent colonial world, building knowledge about past places is not simply the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, or for the sake of satisfying the colloquial wishes of local communities. For the Pacific and elsewhere, a growing understanding of how colonialism in all of its various guises worked “on the ground” in different localities is absolutely necessary for understanding contemporary social, political, economic, and environmental struggles (Flexner 2014; Hall 2000; Little 2007). In this case, part of building a sense of place for the New Hebrides missions involved mapping the locations where Melanesian people, converts and otherwise, carried out their daily lives, alternately resisting or welcoming the colonial agents of the Presbyterian Church. Overall, the primacy of indigenous peoples’ lives and their ability to shape the colonial encounter as experienced in the process of conversion becomes central in a narrative in which oral traditions and archaeology are foregrounded, which is a shift from orthodox accounts of mission history (see also Lydon 2009; Middleton 2003, 2008). This is where archaeology begins to show its potential as a “decolonizing” tool, something that local communities can use for documenting the pasts that matter for them while also contributing to a wider critical discussion of what the emergence of “modernity” over the last five centuries means for contemporary culture.

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#### NOTES

1. Classic examples include Bellwood 1972; Green 1980; Green et al. 1967; Kirch and Kelly 1975; Lade-foged et al. 1987; Rosendahl 1994; and Weisler and Kirch 1985.
2. For example, in a 2009 reconciliation ceremony, local people changed the name of their settlement from Dillon’s Bay to Williams’ Bay to reflect the importance of this event to the place (Naupa 2011:96–103). Dillon’s Bay is nevertheless used in this article to reflect its continuing wide usage and historical significance.

3. As a case in point, the national motto of Vanuatu is “*Long God yumi stanap*,” which can be translated as “we progress with God.” Likewise, the provincial motto for TAFEA Province, in which the islands of Tanna and Erromango are located, is “*Long God TAFEA i gro*,” or “TAFEA grows with God,” reflecting the integration of Christian belief with indigenous postcolonial government.
4. Mission encounters throughout the Asia-Pacific region often involved worldview-changing confrontations between radically different systems of belief that proved challenging both for indigenous people and for the European missionaries attempting to do the work of conversion (Keane 2007). Rock art represents one possible medium for expressing people’s experiences of shifting cosmologies.
5. There are many examples of stone monuments elsewhere in Vanuatu, but stone construction is not typical for Erromango and much of Tanna, at least in the recent past.
6. During the 2013 field season, local informants revealed the location of the *kastom* stone where Nok-wenuk was believed to reside, which is still present on the landscape.
7. Future field seasons may explore the function of these stones through excavation.
8. Here it is worth noting that the story of Iarisi recounted above is contested by some other people on Tanna, which is an island where claims to knowledge are often asserted, negotiated, and reinterpreted (Lindstrom 1990).

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of place is a powerful theoretical tool in the social sciences and humanities, which can be especially useful in archaeological work that involves community-based collaboration. Using place as a starting point, archaeologists can beneficially use their skills to answer questions that are of relevance to the local communities with which we work while also advancing knowledge about the past. For historical archaeology, this often involves engaging in dialogue across multiple lines of evidence, including material remains from the past, written documents, and local oral traditions. Recent fieldwork on the islands of Erromango and Tanna, Vanuatu, exploring early landscapes relating to Christian conversion uses this kind of approach. A major part of preliminary survey work involves mapping features in the mission sites and surrounding areas. Archaeological cartographic techniques help build a sense of place that provides engaging research for a collaborative environment with local Melanesian communities, while also producing new perspectives on colonialism in the South Pacific. This approach is not limited to the recent past, being applicable to any collaborative, community-based archaeological research that incorporates the use of oral traditions. **KEYWORDS:** Melanesia, historical archaeology, Vanuatu, missions, landscape archaeology, mapping, oral traditions, community archaeology.